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**CLAUSEWITZ COUNSELS NAPOLEON III ON THE PLAN FOR REGIME CHANGE
IN MEXICO (1862-1867)**

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CLAUSEWITZ ON NAPOLEON III'S PLAN FOR REGIME CHANGE IN MEXICO

The leader of a powerful western nation decided to intervene in a large, sparsely populated desert country across the ocean to stop atrocities perpetrated by that government on its people and to gain influence in that region. He was convinced by exiles from that country that his army would be met with tears of joy by the entire population who were eager to throw off local rule and let an outsider have control. Leery of going it alone, this leader built a coalition of the willing and invaded.¹ After swift initial successes, the army found itself campaigning in a country three times the size of Texas against guerilla forces supported by a neighboring country. There were calls for more troops but the leader refused to increase the force. The resources expected from the invaded country to offset campaign costs failed to materialize as promised, and the western nation suffered significant economic drain. Is this President George W. Bush in Iraq in 2003? Actually this story, 140 years old, describes French Emperor Napoleon III's invasion of Mexico in 1862. Had Carl von Clausewitz been Napoleon III's military advisor from 1862 to 1867, he would have counseled against a military campaign for regime change in Mexico as unwinnable due to American opposition; and if initiated anyway, his campaign plan would have focused on neutralizing the two centers of gravity.

Memo to His Highness, Emperor Napoléon III (15 Oct 1861): Your Highness, these are my thoughts on sending a military expedition to Mexico to collect outstanding debts. This expedition could go as easily as it did in 1838-9 when just a blockade and seizure of the port of Veracruz resulted in payment. However, the situation in Mexico has changed. Mexico has concluded three years of civil war and has little resources with which to pay—the reason they repudiated the debt. This time it is not Santa Anna, but President Benito Juárez who is the leader. Juárez is a Zapotec Indian; this group does not know when they are defeated and will continue to fight with great tenacity.² Mexico owes 200,000 francs to French businesses, but if you can't deliver a

diplomatic solution, your cost could exceed what is owed for three reasons. First, “the defensive form of warfare is intrinsically stronger than the offensive.”³ The Mexicans, though outgunned by your forces, are battle-hardened after three years of war and will have prepared defenses to reduce your forces and supplies. Second, “the degree of force that must be used against the enemy depends on the scale of the political demands.”⁴ Unlike the British and Spanish claims, your demands are perceived as dubious; therefore the Mexicans may resist. Third, if memory serves, just occupying Veracruz in 1838-9 decimated the ranks to yellow fever. Therefore, along with the Spanish and British co-claimants, I urge you to make accommodation with Mexicans pursuant to the Convention of London. – In your most excellent service, von Clausewitz

Memo to Imperial Military Advisor, von Clausewitz (1 Dec 1861): The French Second Empire is at its peak, having won back much of our Napoléonic glory with a string of military victories in Africa, Spain, the Crimea, and most recently in Italy. We easily subdued the Mexican forces with bayonets in 1838-9; therefore, with great confidence I have sent 6,000 troops under General Lorencez to Mexico, ostensibly to collect the debt. Though the British and Spanish made accommodation with Mexico, I have rejected the Conventions of London and La Soledad because I have more important goals to achieve in Mexico.⁵ The first, a religious goal, is to stop the predominantly protestant Americans from annexing more of catholic Mexico, and do it while the American Civil War keeps the Monroe Doctrine from being enforced. This is an opportunity for France to return to North America since losing the so-called Louisiana Purchase in 1803. The second, a diplomatic goal, is to place the Austrian Emperor’s brother, Archduke Maximilian, on the throne as Mexican Emperor in exchange for Austria handing Venice back to Italy. The third, an economic goal, is to increase the fortunes of our glorious Second Empire by building an inter-oceanic canal, tapping the wealth of Mexico (cotton and the renowned gold of Sonora), and

expanding the market for French goods and investments.⁶ The fourth, a cultural goal, is to create the “first link in a chain of cultured, well-governed, liberal, independent states, under the civilizing influence of France.”⁷ The Empress Eugénia (de Montijo from Granada, Spain) also sees this as justice for Mexico pulling away from Spain in 1821.⁸ – Emperor Napoléon III

Memo to His Highness, Emperor Napoléon III (1 Feb 1862): Your Highness, “if war is part of policy, policy will determine its character. As policy becomes more ambitious and vigorous, so will war.”⁹ Since you have raised the political demands from paying a debt (expedition) to total capitulation (invasion), you will face great resistance. Therefore, 6,000 troops will not be nearly enough to accomplish the necessary military objectives. To achieve your political ends, at a minimum, your forces must defeat the Mexican Army and capture Mexico City, provide security for the new Mexican Emperor, and ensure law and order in a very large country. In addition, depending on how the American Civil War ends, your forces may have to defend against a large unfriendly army (~200,000) to the north that can easily topple the Mexican Emperor. Let me be clear, “no one starts a war—or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so—without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it.”¹⁰ Since you have increased your political ends, you must consider whether you have the means and how you intend to use those means to achieve those ends. More importantly, you must clearly understand the nature of the war you propose to start. Initially, you will wage a limited war with limited means against Juárez who will wage a defensive war of preservation and a protracted war of attrition—what is essentially for him an unlimited war. Later on, unless you take action to avoid it, you will face a conventional war with America. A quick campaign totally focused on capture and defeat of Juárez is critical. “Time... is less likely to bring favor to the victor than to the vanquished.”¹¹ – In your most excellent service, von Clausewitz

Memo to Imperial Military Advisor, von Clausewitz (1 June 1862): As you know, General Lorencez, with an infantry brigade with only bayonets, landed in Veracruz on 17 December with the goal of marching 200 miles to capture Mexico City. I was notified that on 5 May, he was only halfway to Mexico City and was routed by Mexican troops at Puebla fortress (Cinco de Mayo). Therefore, I am sending two more divisions (26,000 troops) with artillery under General Forey and General Bazaine while General Lorencez's forces fall back to Veracruz.¹² I plan on French forces being in Mexico only until the Mexican imperial government can raise an army for its own security (maybe two years). Thus I am leaving the military strategy of how to accomplish the religious, diplomatic, economic, and cultural goals to the new Mexican Emperor and Generals Forey and Bazaine when they get there. – Emperor Napoléon III

Memo to His Highness, Emperor Napoléon III (1 Aug 1862): Your Highness, I heard the news that in July Generals Forey and Bazaine captured Puebla. However, even with 26,000 troops, the siege still took 61 days! After the actual fortress was assaulted, the Mexicans “ignore[d] military science by defending every building in the city.”¹³ This indicates that much of the country is still loyal to President Juárez, and as I said earlier, the Mexicans will resist because the political demands are so high; Juárez will not easily admit defeat. It is unfortunate that after Puebla fell, Juárez departed Mexico City without being taken. I believe that the war will assume a nature similar to that which your uncle faced in Spain in 1793—namely, guerilla warfare. Your forces must reverse this critical turn of events quickly because Juárez and his American support are the centers of gravity. – In your most excellent service, von Clausewitz

Memo to Imperial Military Advisor, von Clausewitz (12 Oct 1863): I have recalled Marshal Forey, leaving General Bazaine as the Commander-in-Chief of Mexico while we wait for Archduke Maximilian to arrive. I believe this is a wise decision because, as you know, General

Bazaine has decades of experience dealing with guerillas in Africa and speaks fluent Spanish. I was gratified to see that the French Imperial Army was received into the city by the Mexican Regency of Notables and that 5 towns and 37 villages have invited Archduke Maximilian to become their Emperor. However, I “see now that [I] had been ill-informed [by the exiles] about the state of Mexican opinion, although [I] still retain a hope that it [will] rally round the monarchy.”¹⁴ This will enable me to withdraw French forces leaving only a small nucleus behind for the formation of a local force under the new Imperial flag of Mexico. Due to General Bazaine’s masterful work, we already control the main strip of territory between the capital and Veracruz, and Juárez is boxed up in the north. To counter the problem you raised earlier, namely the scourge of yellow fever, I have taken Admiral Jurien de la Graviere’s advice to have the ruler of Egypt raise a force of black battalions, as it is common knowledge that blacks are more resistant to disease than whites.¹⁵ All goes well. – Emperor Napoléon III

Memo to His Highness, Emperor Napoléon III (1 Dec 1863): Your Highness, I sense your optimism for the state of affairs in Mexico, but I do not share it. At an operational level, I agree that General Bazaine is the ideal for Commander-in-Chief of Mexico. In fact, I gather from my correspondence that General Bazaine has a clear campaign plan to accomplish pacification in preparation for the arrival of the new Emperor. With 14,000 French and 7,000 Mexican troops, he has brilliantly cleared the center of the country in six weeks by methods he learned in Africa.¹⁶ However, the centers of gravity, which are “the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends,” are not being addressed at the strategic level.¹⁷ At the outset, Mexico City was seen as the center of gravity for capitulation of the Mexican people. Though you now occupy Mexico City, Juárez has “taken the republic with him in his wagons; and it survive[s] at the headquarters of his army in the north...the rest of the vast country [is] still

governed, if at all, in the name of the republic, and until [Juárez is] disposed of, the new Emperor [can] hardly hope to reign.”¹⁸ Therefore, Juárez is your first center of gravity. You must isolate him diplomatically from the Americans and defeat him militarily. However, a second more difficult center of gravity exists: the belligerency of the United States. You cannot deal with this militarily for the Americans are a powerful and intrusive neighbor. Neutralizing American belligerence must be “the point against which all [your] energies should be directed.”¹⁹ None of your plans will stand without American acquiescence; you must gain it through all possible ways and means at your disposal: diplomatic, economic, political, and informational.

– In your most excellent service, von Clausewitz

Memo to Imperial Military Advisor, von Clausewitz (11 Apr 1864): General Bazaine, the acting vice regent, has things well in hand for the arrival of Archduke Maximilian in June. Pacification has gone well. As he tells it, “the war is over except for a ring of distant provinces beyond the reach of French columns.”²⁰ He has imposed order, restored the telegraph, made road traffic safe from bandits, and is progressing on railway construction.²¹ Yesterday, Maximilian agreed to become Emperor, and the Mexican delegation met him at Miramar with signatures of support from the people of Mexico. True, the Americans refuse to recognize the Emperor, but if the Confederates win independence, they will provide diplomatic recognition and a buffer between the Empire of Mexico and the United States. General Bazaine desires more troops, but I cannot afford it as our hands are full in Europe and with our colonies. – Emperor Napoléon III

Memo to His Highness, Emperor Napoléon III (1 Nov 1864): Your Highness, I believe your recent promotion of General Bazaine to Marshal is warranted for his brilliant handling of a difficult situation. Six months after inauguration of the Mexican Empire, it is still only Marshal Bazaine’s brilliance backed up by French forces that keeps the Mexican Emperor secure. If you

were to withdraw Marshal Bazaine or French forces, Juárez would be emboldened to reassert himself with the assistance of the Americans and threaten the Mexican monarchy. In addition, it is not clear how much longer the American Civil War will last or that the Confederates, who seem to be on the defensive, will prevail. This will be critical in light of the American House of Representatives passing a resolution unanimously condemning the Mexican Emperor in April.²² I have heard from Marshal Bazaine that the Mexican Empire is already in debt for 24 million pesos.²³ In addition to his extravagance, political actions he has taken to liberalize Mexico are the same actions Juárez would have taken. The Emperor is thereby alienating his political supporters who are opposed to Juárez.²⁴ This political illogic will quickly destabilize the Mexican Emperor's situation. Let me state it up front: "war is a continuation of policy by other means."²⁵ Therefore, if the policies for which you went to war are little different from what was replaced, of what value was the invasion and what return do you have on your investment of blood and treasure? – In your most excellent service, von Clausewitz

Memo to Imperial Military Advisor, von Clausewitz (15 Feb 1865): As you have heard, Marshal Bazaine continued his brilliance by subduing the Oaxaca fortress with only 5,500 men capturing 8,000 prisoners and 60 guns with only 50 casualties.²⁶ In contrast, I am aware of Emperor Maximilian's lack of brilliance. In communications with him, I have kept up a continuous "stream of reprimands, criticism, advice and veiled warnings."²⁷ Last year in the Convention of Miramar, I agreed to station 20,000 French troops in Mexico for three years and let him permanently keep 8,000 Foreign Legionnaires.²⁸ I've come to the realization that Emperor Maximilian was a bad bargain, and while things look stable, I am taking action to lessen French involvement. Fortunately, Rome, Austria, Belgium, Great Britain, Spain, and Italy have recognized the Mexican Emperor.²⁹ Therefore, I have prevailed upon Austrian Emperor

Franz Josef to provide Mexico with 7,000 troops. In addition, the Belgians have agreed to send 2,000 men. The first ship sailed from Trieste on 19 November, with five more to follow—one every two weeks.³⁰ Already three French infantry battalions with heavy guns have been recalled.³¹ All is going well. – Emperor Napoléon III

Memo to His Highness, Emperor Napoléon III (1 Jul 1865): Your Highness, what appeared to be going well in February has rapidly deteriorated. The American Civil War concluded in April with a Confederate surrender, and General Sheridan's forces are already massing on the Texas-Mexico border.³² Marshal Bazaine will be forced to concentrate his forces in view of a possible invasion from the north. Unless you send more forces, Marshal Bazaine will be outnumbered and outgunned. The forces now in Mexico are 28,000 French, 2,000 Belgians, 500 Sudanese, 7,000 forces gathered from all over the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and 10,000 Mexicans. There are so many cultural and linguistic divisions within the ranks that it impairs efficiency; many of these troops are unable to even converse with each other. In addition, the Austrians are older and seasoned, but unruly and difficult to control, while the Belgians are mostly unseasoned youths and difficult to use. Frustration amongst the troops is manifesting itself in insubordination, fights, and excessive drinking.³³ These combine to lower the level of performance and add to the friction faced by Marshal Bazaine. In addition, Juárez's forces have superior mobility over the French infantry because they have many horse mounts carrying small arms and now, in some cases, breech loading rifles from the Americans.³⁴ This keeps Bazaine from being able to concentrate against the enemy—a violation of the first principle of strategy.³⁵ What we see unfolding is that war is “a paradoxical trinity—composed of primordial violence, hatred and enmity...of the play of chance and probability... and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy.”³⁶ In this case, achieving your political goals is dependent on the

interplay of two interlocking trinities, the war against Juárez and the war in America: the latter, now concluded, feeding into the former. At this point, chance and probability point to the Mexican Empire's demise. The reputation and future of France hangs in the balance.

– In your most excellent service, von Clausewitz

Memo to Imperial Military Advisor, von Clausewitz (15 Dec 1865): I have decided to withdraw Marshal Bazaine and all 28,000 men from Mexico. The expedition has grown unpopular in the French Imperial Court and French forces are needed along the Rhine to protect the Second Empire against an increasingly powerful and militant Prussia. Prussia attacked and seized Schleswig-Holstein from Denmark last year and is now threatening the Austrians with whom we have a treaty. American Secretary of State William Seward has used the presence of black Egyptian-Sudanese forces to raise an American and European outcry against perceived slavery.³⁷ Therefore, relief forces cannot be sent in and the Austrians and Egyptians are pulling their forces out of Mexico, which undermines the security of the Mexican monarchy. As such, I have urged Emperor Maximilian to abdicate. – Emperor Napoléon III

Memo to His Highness, Emperor Napoléon III (15 Feb 1866): Your Highness, whether in Mexico or Europe, “in war the result is never final.”³⁸ – In your most excellent service, von Clausewitz

Conclusion

Early in 1867 the French forces left Mexico City. Emperor Maximilian refused to abdicate the throne; instead he took charge of the remaining Mexican Imperial forces and marched them to Querétaro. The city fell quickly to Juárez's forces; Maximilian was captured and executed by firing squad on 19 June 1867.³⁹ Richard Hill and Peter Hogg summarize the adventure: “The five years and three months of intervention in Mexico brought the French only profitless expenditure,

loss of men and money, discredit in Europe, and the damaging ill-will of the United States. The accumulated expenses and losses of the military and naval establishments fatally crippled the French in their financial preparations for the war with the Prussians, which the French government with incredible folly precipitated in 1870. Thus the decision of Napoleon III to lead France into military intervention in Mexico proved to be the prelude of the fall of the Second Empire and to his own ruin.”⁴⁰

Four major points led to French failure. First, Juárez was fighting a war for unlimited ends (survival). The French Emperor, not fully committed, was fighting a war for limited objectives with limited resources. Because of this mismatch in the wills and nature of the war, what happened to the British in the American Revolutionary War 80 years earlier and to the Americans in Vietnam 100 years later became the fate of the French in Mexico. Second, Napoléon III did not count the cost of his campaign, and his planning did not identify centers of gravity: ousted President Benito Juárez and American belligerence. Third, Napoléon III saw the Mexican invasion as amenable to mostly a military solution and failed to engage all instruments of power to neutralize the centers of gravity, particularly, American opposition. Fourth, the campaign should have been swift and overwhelming because, as Clausewitz points out, time accrues to the defender. The situation unraveled over time due to a lack of will, a lack of adequate resources, and lack of an aggressive campaign to quickly subdue Juárez. In the end, the wars France won over Prussia under Napoléon I, reemerged in 1870 when Prussia was strong and France was weak. Thus Clausewitz: “In war the result is never final.”

Note: In reality, Carl von Clausewitz died 16 November 1831, thirty years before Napoleon III’s fiasco. While the scenario is fictional and the memoranda contrived, the facts and issues discussed in the memos are rooted in actual historical events and documents, which explains the copious endnotes.

Notes

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